

THE BIBLE AT TEN THOUSAND FEET



PAULINE EPISTLES
PERSONAL EPISTLES

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Paul's four personal epistles are written to three individuals, two pastors and a layperson. Paul writes two letters to young pastor Timothy who had accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, and then one letter to older pastor Titus, and a layperson dealing with the issue of slavery named Philemon. These letters obviously differ from Paul's letters to churches, simply in their scope and audience. However, because Paul's letters are different when written to individuals, there are people who wonder if they are authentically Paul's work. It is still, however, a valid choice to see Paul's letters to individuals as being authentically Paul's work, just to a different audience.

FIRST TIMOTHY

Paul appears to write his first letter to Timothy after he leaves Timothy on assignment in Ephesus while Paul went on to Macedonia. Due to this geographic location and what we know of Paul's life, this was probably sometime between 62-65 AD, after most of his "prison letters". The occasion for Paul's writing is to give instruction to this young pastor, Timothy who was overseeing a handful of churches in the area of Ephesus.

Paul's letter to Timothy here, however, is not all business. Much of Paul's letter is of a personal letter, encouraging the young man and telling people not "to look down on him because of his age" as well as to "take a little wine for your stomach". This letter to Timothy shows us a personable and caring mentor, something that we would not have with only the letters to the churches.

First Timothy does contain practical advice for Timothy, and this is practical advice that has been used (and argued over) by the church for years. Included in the things that Paul addresses in First Timothy are: qualifications for church work, instructions for specific groups within the church (i.e. older men, widows), and staying steadfast against heresies.

SECOND TIMOTHY

The warmth and practicality of First Timothy gives way in Second Timothy as Paul pens what may have been his last letter before his death. In the

letter, Paul alludes to his death time and time again, saying things like he is “being poured out as a drink offering.” He exhorts young Timothy to not be ashamed of him, but to remain steadfast in the faith, even in the midst of attacks that will come from all sides, including from false teachers. Paul uses Second Timothy to reaffirm the theology that he has taught Timothy, giving one of the clearest affirmations of the role of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16, “all Scripture is breathed out by God...”). While Paul asks for some items to be delivered to him by Timothy, it is not known if Timothy ever made it out to see his mentor before his death.

TITUS

Titus may have been a pastor recruited from Paul’s time in Corinth. Twice Titus is mentioned in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, and both times in conjunction with a “collection for the saints” being gathered for poor Christians. For this reason, it is possible that Titus was a local member of the Corinthians church, although he may have been someone from outside the city church. Regardless, by the time that Paul is writing him here, Titus is serving a difficult church on the island of Crete.

The church in Crete seems to be new. There are still no appointed elders for the churches and there seem to be issues that are making this difficult (i.e. it appears one of potential elders has wild children, Cretans themselves say that they are liars and lazy). Additionally, there seems to be generational strife at work in Crete, which leads Paul to address how to handle older men, older women, younger men, younger women, etc. As usual, there seems to be rival teaching in Crete, and in Crete it appears to be of a “circumcision party” Jewish-Christian heresy.

Two possible date possibilities exist for Titus. A later date around the same time as First Timothy (mid 60’s) seems to be the most likely, however, there is a possibility that Titus was written even earlier around the same time as Paul’s letters to the Corinthians (mid to late 50’s). Whichever date is chosen, Paul’s encouragement for this pastor of a new church remains constant.

PHILEMON

Philemon is a one-of-a-kind letter from Paul. Being a personal letter, but not a pastoral letter, it is Paul's only letter to a singular layperson. The occasion of the writing is a slave named Onesimus (whose name means "profitable"), who has either run away from his owner Philemon or has been on loan to Paul from Philemon. Regardless, Paul is now sending Onesimus back to Philemon (likely in Colossae, but possibly in Ephesus) and is informing Philemon that his slave is now a Christian, a "dear brother". Paul does not argue for Onesimus' freedom, but rather simply that he would be received back into Philemon's household. We have no evidence of what happened to Onesimus or Philemon, but we can likely assume that Philemon heeded what Paul had to say. The letter provides not only a human interest story, but also an example of the justifying work of Christ reflected in human relationships between Christians.